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Reinventing conflict prevention?

Women and the prevention of the reemergence of conflict in Burundi

Abstract

Based on interviews conducted in Burundi with representatives of women's groups, and in light of existing knowledge on conflict prevention and peacebuilding in divided societies, the article critically examines national and international efforts to prevent a re-emergence of the conflict. It argues that conflict prevention initiatives led by women's groups, though often overlooked and sidelined, could provide important insights for improving operational conflict prevention models. Through their multi-level, low-key, inclusive and versatile activities, Burundian women's organizations challenge and complement conventional operational conflict prevention practices that are often ill-suited to the needs of intrastate conflicts.

Introduction

Burundi is a small African country that has suffered numerous episodes of mass violence over the past decades, some of them of a genocidal nature. While it has attracted much less international attention than some of its neighbors like the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Rwanda, Burundi has been at the center of several peace building initiatives, the most successful one leading in 2000 to the signing of the Arusha peace agreement. Major tensions however arose again in 2015 when, against constitutional provisions allowing for a maximum of two presidential mandates, President Pierre Nkurunziza entered office for a third term. The ensuing political and military conflict generated hundreds of casualties, and pushed more than 400.000 people into exile. Most of the leaders of the opposition had to flee, as well as most high profile civil society activists. While a few civilians have since returned, today many Burundians are still living in refugee camps located in Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, and numerous others have applied for asylum in Belgium, the former colonial power, and in other European countries. While weakened by repression and forced exile, the opposition still contests Nkurunziza's legitimacy, and in response the government has increased its control over the civil society organizations and political parties, and has promulgated a constitutional reform that *de facto* abrogates the power-sharing arrangements instituted by the 2000 Arusha peace agreement. The population lives in fear of repression and of violence, and levels of poverty have skyrocketed.

While the international community seems powerless in face of this deteriorated situation, Burundian civil society organizations have designed and implemented many initiatives in order to prevent another cycle of mass violence, which might be induced by the forthcoming 2020 elections. Among them, women's organizations have played a major role.

They have been particularly active in conflict prevention since 1993 and the “Women for Peace” movement. Since then, multiple women’s networks and umbrella groups have been created, like the CAFOB (in French: Collectif des Associations et ONGs Féminines du Burundi, “Collective of Women's Associations and NGOs of Burundi”). Well-established women’s organizations, like Dushirehamwe (“Let’s Reconcile” in Kirundi) have also launched ambitious “train the trainers” programs in conflict prevention, mediation and peace building, and have managed to coach thousands of women all over the country, including in rural areas.

Over the past two decades, Burundian women’s organizations have provided stability and consistency in peace building initiatives. They represent a certain continuity in peace initiatives before, during and after the multiple episodes of violence that Burundi has witnessed. Many of them have been involved both in diplomatic processes as well as in grassroots initiatives. During the negotiations over the 2000 Arusha Peace Agreement for instance, women’s groups’ work was paramount. Around a half of their recommendations were eventually incorporated in the final version of the peace agreement (UNIFEM, 2005). Since 2015, Burundian women’s groups have launched multiple activities in order to prevent the reemergence of the conflict, notably at the grassroots level. Their initiatives are however not much publicized at the national and international levels, where the “dialogue” process largely ignores civil society work, and is monopolized by political representatives.

The role that civil society organizations can play in peacebuilding, especially in divided societies, is well documented, highlighting for instance the diversity of civil society contributions (van Tongeren, Brenk, Hellema and Verhoeven, 2005), the interplay between national and local peacebuilding (Mitchell and Hancock, 2012), or the importance of local

actors for fostering peacebuilding's legitimacy (Hancock and Mitchell, 2018). Similarly, the importance of peace initiatives led by women, and/or taking a gender perspective into account, has long been recognized too (see for instance Anderlini, 2007; Flaherty, Byrne, Tusi and Matyók, 2015; Gizelis, 2011; Porter, 2007; Väyrynen, 2010). This literature has mostly focused on women's potential role during the transitional and post-conflict phases, putting for instance the stress on their contribution to reconciliation processes. Until recently however, and with very few exceptions (see Caprioli 2005; Shoemaker 2002; Vincent, 2003), research had not yet really looked at women's potential roles in conflict prevention. As Vincent remarks (2003, p.5): "Calls for conflict prevention strategies to take into account a 'gendered perspective' (and what is usually meant here is a 'women's perspective' rather than a gender perspective) lack a clear theoretical grounding and have become a somewhat hollow talisman whose real meaning is unclear." A series of recent publications (see for instance Basu and Confortini, 2017; de Carvalho and Kumalo, 2019; Kapur and Rees, 2019) have started remedying that gap, by studying how involving women's groups as well as a gender perspective in conflict prevention could lead to more inclusive conflict prevention processes, in terms of actors, but also of perspectives.

The article inscribes itself in this new direction of research, and argues that women's groups offer alternative, creative, and complementary approaches to those used at both the national and international levels for preventing violence escalation. After a short section describing how fieldwork data was collected, the article critically appraises conflict prevention models and practices, in light of the current situation in Burundi. The article shows how conventional conflict prevention models de facto sideline civil society groups and in particular women's groups. An analysis of Burundian women's groups activities

however demonstrate that they could complement and provide further inspiration for adapting current prevention approaches to contemporary conflicts' features.

1. A few words on data collection

The article builds on a fieldwork conducted in May 2017 in the capital city Bujumbura and in its vicinity, during which I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with leaders or spokespersons of eleven women's groups, as well as fifteen open-ended interviews with women militants and with civil society groups working on mediating and preventing local conflicts. The interviewed women were of mixed ethnic (Hutu and Tutsi) and religious (Catholic, Protestant and Muslim) background, and were all of working age. The participants were chosen in order to be as representative as possible of the diversity of Burundian women's groups, in terms of longevity (from groups with two or more decades of existence, to organizations created during or after the 2015 crisis), objectives, constituencies and target audiences, but also of relationship with the government. The sample therefore includes both women's organizations that are close to the government, and groups that self-identify as part of the opposition. The interviews included open-ended questions, covering topics such as participants' activities in the fields of early warning, conflict prevention and mediation, involvement in current national or international dialogue and mediation events, collaboration and networking with other civil society organizations, and problems and obstacles encountered in their conflict prevention and early warning activities. The interviews' lengths ranged from one to four hours, and all but one were taped.

The article also relies upon an in-depth knowledge of the Burundian political and social context, built through regular teaching and research-related stays since 2009. This

extensive experience has allowed me, over the years, to build trust relationships with a number of Burundian women active in peace organizations, and to attend some of the activities they organize, and in which “outsiders” usually do not participate. This insider/outsider status (Watts, 2006) has undoubtedly allowed me to gain access to important information, and to meet with civil society leaders who otherwise avoid giving interviews, for fear of repression. Since the escalation of tensions in 2015 a large number of civil society organizations, and in particular civil rights and women’s groups, have indeed either ceased their public activities and/or went into hiding. This situation complicated the organization of some interviews, as a few women I contacted were initially reluctant to speak with me, because they feared exposition and arrest, especially as some of them had already received death threats, and had to move houses, and/or to change their phones and phone numbers. Interviews were often only agreed upon after a series of emails, phone calls and WhatsApp messages, even when I had already met the participant in the past. Participants decided where and when we could meet, and often did not want to meet at their place of work, and proposed instead to meet either at my hotel or at some other neutral place, like the headquarters of another, less contentious, civil society organization. As a consequence, and in order to protect the women who accepted to be interviewed, this article does not mention their names, and does not associate organizations to specific statements.

2. Conflict prevention models and the current crisis in Burundi

Conflict prevention theories traditionally make the distinction between two main approaches to the prevention of conflict and violence: on the one hand, so-called “operational” or “light” conflict prevention approaches are associated with preventive

diplomacy, good offices, or negotiation and mediation practices. On the other hand, “structural” or “deep” conflict prevention approaches notably involve development, good governance and equality programs. While the former approaches are usually top-down, political, state-centered and institutional, the latter are described as being more interested in the grassroots, less directly political, and can involve various types of actors from the economic, social and cultural fields (Ackermann, 2003, pp. 341-342). Differences between operational and structural conflict prevention are also said to pertain to their timing, operational approaches being more short term, while structural approaches can be more long term and affect the society for a longer period of time (Leatherman et al., 1999, p. 47; Wallensteen and Möller, 2002). Different sets of actors are associated to each type of conflict prevention, states and international organizations being considered as instrumental for operational prevention and especially preventive diplomacy (see for instance George, 1999), while representatives of concerned ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious groups are sometimes also included in these activities. On the other hand, international and national development agencies, as well as international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are key actors for structural and long-term prevention, sometimes harnessing local civil society actors too (Barnes, 2006).

The academic distinction between operational and structural approaches to conflict prevention is however not always reflected on the ground, as some conflict prevention initiatives do not fall neatly in one or the other of these categories. For instance, as we will further discuss in the article, some bottom-up initiatives are strongly political in nature in spite of not being implemented by political actors, thus blurring the distinction between operational and structural conflict prevention. In addition, conventional approaches to

conflict prevention have been criticized as being insufficiently grounded in the specific local context, and for their one size fits all approach. Some of the tools favored by operational conflict prevention approaches also seem often ill suited to the characteristics of contemporary conflicts (George, 1999, p. 16). The stress frequently put on preventive diplomacy is for instance seen as not completely adapted to the need of internal conflicts, which typically involve non-state armed groups that do not have access to the international political and diplomatic scene (Stedman, 1995; Jentleson, 2000). Limits of preventive diplomacy for solving internal conflicts also relate to the fact that the international system still largely relies on the principle of national sovereignty, thus severely constraining the international community's capacity for diplomatic intervention (Schnabel, 2002). These critics relate to some of those addressed to conventional western peacebuilding, with conflict prevention models seen as being based on a narrow understanding of conflicts privileging their political and military features, as being too elitist and ignorant of local realities, and so on (Aggestam, 2003).

In crises that are primarily understood as being political and institutional, operational conflict prevention approaches are usually favored, with a focus put on initiatives led either by the international community or by the concerned political actors themselves (Zyck and Muggah, 2012). The Burundian case study illustrates well such an understanding, with a clear preference for political initiatives, while structural and long-term approaches are mostly left to the care of NGOs (non-governmental organizations). Several dialogue and mediation initiatives have indeed been organized over the past few years in order to solve the current crisis and to prevent the reemergence of the conflict. For instance, the Burundian government has launched in May 2015 a "National Commission of Inter-Burundi Dialogue" (CNDI). It

involved fifteen handpicked delegates, as well as public hearings and debates. Lacking inclusivity, the process remained locked and inconsistent, and officially ended in 2017 with the publication of conclusions largely supporting the government's policies. In parallel, at the end of 2015 the East African Community (EAC) has led another political mediation process called "Inter-Burundian Dialogue". This process however ended in 2019 in a stalemate, mostly because of the refusal of the Burundian government to sit at the same table and to discuss with Burundian opposition leaders.

So far all these attempts have failed to solve the conflict, and to prevent its further escalation. One of the main shortcomings of these dialogue initiatives is that they are built on the hypothesis that the current conflict displays more or less the same characteristics, and has the same causes, than the preceding ones. But the preceding crises had developed around ethnic divisions, and the instrumentalization of these divisions by political parties. By contrast, the conflict that started escalating in 2015 does not (yet?) bear any relationship to ethnic divisions, and political parties are not its central actors. What is at stake in the current crisis is the legacy of the Arusha peace agreement as well as the democratic nature of the Burundian constitution, which opposition leaders say are in danger. In addition, these prevention initiatives denote a marked inability to move beyond the elitist approaches traditionally favored in operational conflict prevention, and to give space to Burundian non-state and/or local actors, whose voices have been muted by the government.

In parallel, structural conflict prevention initiatives have faced increasing difficulties since 2017. At first, they benefitted from the decision taken in 2016 by the European Union, one of the main providers of development aid in Burundi, to halt its direct financial aid to the Burundian government. Instead, the EU started to directly channel aid through INGOs.

INGOs have been key conflict prevention actors in the country since the beginning of the 1990s (Wohlgemuth, 2005), but several recent decisions by the Burundian government have severely weakened their capacity to contribute to structural conflict prevention. Under a law passed in 2017 for instance, 30% of a project budget managed by an INGO must be deposited in the Burundian central bank. INGOs are also required to sign a cooperation agreement with the Burundian ministry of foreign affairs, as well as with other ministries relevant to the fields they are active in. INGOs that have not complied have been suspended, and this has already had dramatic consequences for structural conflict prevention activities. In 2018 for instance, the EU has tried to implement a €5 million initiative in order to support rural development, which had to be postponed because involved INGOs had been suspended. The Burundian government has also started to enforce a 2017 law that sets ethnic ratios (60% Hutus, 40% Tutsis) among the INGOs local staff, and that requires INGOs to declare this information to the government. As there is an important risk that this data would be misused, several INGOs such as Handicap International or Avocats sans Frontières have decided to leave the country, and other major organizations like Médecins sans Frontières have henceforth refused to officially register in Burundi.

These recent evolutions and events have put local NGOs at the forefront of structural prevention initiatives, but often without the support of either the Burundian government (because of lack of funds and/or of ideological objections to their activities), or of INGOs. In conflict prevention models, civil society actors are often praised for their role in local development, in the fight against discrimination and inequality, as well as in education and awareness-raising activities (Barnes, 2006). However, their latent lack of resources, of representativeness, and of political networks means that local civil society organizations are

usually not invited to the setting and directing the conflict prevention agenda at the national level (Jácome, Milet Andrés Serbin, 2005, p. 1). Their activities remain therefore low-scale and relatively invisible at the international and even national levels.

Among these relatively invisible local actors, women's organizations represent a particularly interesting case. In the Global South, women are more likely to be active in civil society organizations than in political parties or in the security field, but because they are not very present within the state-centered system, they are rarely included in international and national discussions on operational conflict prevention (de Carvalho and Kumalo, 2019, p. 210). Women's groups are doubly likely to be excluded from operational conflict prevention initiatives: as women, they are often deemed incompetent on security issues, and as civil society actors, they are traditionally excluded from political and institutional forums. In the previously mentioned EAC-led Inter-Burundian dialogue for instance, out of 100 Burundian delegates, only 14 were women. However, as we will see in the next section, while confirming these trends, the Burundian case study also shows that women's groups can use their own agency to find creative ways to avoid these obstacles, notably thanks to a re-politicization of the local as a space where to implement operational conflict prevention initiatives.

3. Barriers to women's participation in conflict prevention

Participating in conflict prevention activities has been everything but easy for Burundian women's organizations. Several obstacles and challenges, related to how the conflict prevention field is defined and to who is considered a legitimate conflict prevention actor, explain these difficulties. The first obstacle is that of representativeness. That challenge

derives directly from the way operational conflict prevention, and in particular preventive diplomacy, has been conceptualized, as necessitating the participation of elected officials or official representatives of the State, or of a specific religious, political, linguistic, regional, or ethnic group (Zyck and Muggah, 2012). Such an implicit requirement *de facto* sidelines, or considerably weakens, the participation of civil society representatives in operational conflict prevention. It also pertains to a tendency to understand conflicts at the macro, rather than micro, level. In a conflict or post-conflict context however, very few civil society groups have the opportunity to build a broad-based support, beside the legitimacy acquired via their involvement in grassroots activities. To be invited at the mediation or negotiation table, all civil society groups, including women's groups, have to prove that they are as legitimate as political parties to represent and defend the interests of a specific section of the population. For instance, even though most of the women I spoke with thought that their organization deserved a voice in official dialogue initiatives, notably thanks to their mediation work between local communities, only a handful had been invited, and none of them with any regularity. Women who are recognized as experts on gender issues are more likely to participate as individuals, than as representatives of women's or other civil society organizations (Interview 1, Bujumbura, 10 May 2017). This does not mean that no woman ever participates in dialogue initiatives, but that those who do are either gender experts or political parties' delegates, and in both cases they are not supposed to speak out of turn. Even the oldest and largest women's groups are regularly ignored, on the grounds that they have no electoral mandate, and that their work is not directly relevant to the resolution of the current crisis.

This issue is compounded by the fact that the government has hijacked a certain number of older women's organizations, or even created new ones. Since operational conflict prevention processes are essentially political, the concerned government(s) strive to keep control of it, notably by creating governmental NGOs, also called GONGOs. The existence of these GONGOs is of course not specific to women's groups (Poplewell, 2019), but by pretending to be independent and to represent women's interests, these organizations end up denying access and authority to nonaligned women's associations. One of the government's strategies has therefore been to organize consultations with these GONGOs, while sidelining independent women's groups, that might be more difficult to control (Interview 10, Bujumbura, 15 May 2017). In addition, in recent years the Burundian government has hijacked some women's initiatives that were initially politically independent, such as the Women Platform for Peace and Security, in order to be able to say that it is listening to women's voices. As one of my contacts stated: "In the eyes of the government, the civil society is negatively connoted" (Interview 4, Bujumbura, 11 May 2017). The government makes it very complicated for independent women's organizations to register officially, thus pushing many into illegality (Interview 6, Bujumbura, 13 May 2017), even if they are not involved at all in politics. This leads to what can be described as power struggles between women's organizations that are linked to the government, and those that see themselves as strictly independent, even when they share some objectives in terms of women's rights and gender equality. The fact that operational conflict prevention is so heavily politicized thus indirectly hinders the constitution of a common front among women's organizations (Interview 1, Bujumbura, 10 May 2017).

In Burundi as in other contexts, women's groups find it difficult to build a common agenda for conflict prevention and peace building, because of the variety of groups and interests they represent (Féron, 2017). Interestingly, the question that divides them most is related to the respective merits of operational and structural conflict prevention approaches. While some groups favor non-political, development-related and local approaches to the prevention of the reemergence of conflict, others argue that peace can only be ensured in the longer term if women's organizations, as well as other civil society groups, take a more active political role (Interview 18, Bujumbura, 20 May 2017). But because the government is keen on controlling when and how civil society groups intervene at the political level, intensifying the involvement of women's groups in operational conflict prevention risks precipitating the escalation of violence they wish to avoid. Conversely, staying out of national politics by focusing for instance on local mediation and on structural prevention approaches, might not be enough for preventing a re-escalation of the conflict.

The issue of divergent interests and strategies also echoes in women's groups' relations with the diaspora. Many female politicians and civil society activists who were active until 2015 have taken the road of exile. Some of those who have fled had accumulated crucial political experience and skills during the past decades, for instance by participating in conflict prevention and mediation activities at the highest levels, and/or by holding high-level political positions. Their absence weighs heavily on some women's groups (Interview 17, Bujumbura, 19 May 2017). Some of these exiled activists remain in contact with, and try to advise women's groups still active in the country. But a few of the women who have stayed in spite of the danger think that these women in the diaspora are increasingly out of touch with the local realities. My fieldwork has indeed revealed a sharp difference in approach and

strategy between on the one hand women's organizations that have stayed in Burundi, and that are constrained by how the conflict prevention field is defined and controlled by the Burundian government, and the other hand women activists in the diaspora, who enjoy more freedom of expression in international conflict prevention arenas. Regardless of where the event is taking place, or by whom it is organized, Burundian women representatives cannot speak openly. Exiled women, by contrast, have a lot more freedom to criticize, denounce and challenge the Burundian government, and therefore tend to be more radical: "If you go to Arusha for the mediation, for instance, it is not easy. There are things you cannot say because you will then have to go back home. Those who are outside, the women in the diaspora, they can speak about everything. But us, we can't speak like them, because afterwards we have to go home" (Interview 4, Bujumbura, 11 May 2017).

Women's groups' participation is further hampered by specific gender-related biases, which assume that women are not competent on hard security issues, or on constitutional matters: "It is not a place for children here, we are discussing serious matters", one Burundian official was quoted saying in October 1998, dismissing the women's delegates before the third round of Inter-Burundian Peace Negotiations in Arusha (Mabobori, 2012). This is, again, related to the way conflict prevention has been conceptualized, as a political, diplomatic and possibly military endeavor entailing an expertise on hard security issues, which women's groups are not supposed to possess. Because conflicts are framed as politico-military events, those who are seen as not belonging to these fields are not considered as legitimate or important actors in operational conflict prevention initiatives. This representation is widely shared, even among groups that fight for the same objectives than women's groups. For instance, some of my contacts who identify with the opposition to the

government deplored the fact that opposition leaders themselves tend to ignore women's groups (Interview 1, Bujumbura, 10 May 2017). In May 2015 for example, several military leaders attempted to seize power while President Pierre Nkunrunziza was attending an East African Community summit in Tanzania. The coup was rapidly defeated by soldiers who had remained loyal to the government, and for women's groups, its consequences were devastating. According to several of my contacts, they had at the time started organizing a series of mass street demonstrations for peace, that were gaining momentum. After the attempted putsch, the government intensified its repression against leaders of the opposition, and strengthened its control over civil society activities, *de facto* cutting short women's groups' peaceful strategy.

What should however be underscored is that these gender biases are sometimes held by women organizations' representatives themselves, some of which insist that there are "women's issues" and "men's issues", and that women should therefore refrain from getting involved in matters on which men have more experience: "We want that women think first and foremost about women's issues, we want that women can contribute as women. We don't want women to think about men's issues" (Interview 3, Bujumbura, 11 May 2017). This is directly in line with traditional Burundian culture, which tends to frown upon women participating in public debates and taking political positions. Such preconceptions are very common in sub-Saharan African countries, and explain why, in spite of all the incentives, training and awareness-raising programs implemented by international organizations, women's active political participation, especially in rural communities, remains on average quite low (Féron, 2017). Rural and older women in particular tend to view women's groups as "associations of women who are trying to rebel against customs and traditions", as

explained by one participant (Interview 11, Bujumbura, 15 May 2017). Similarly, in national political circles, women's organizations face obstacles deriving from deeply-ingrained gender stereotypes and role models. As a lip service to gender equality, and because they are seen as innocent and uninfluential, women are occasionally granted access to dialogue and conflict prevention initiatives. But even in these cases they "are not expected to do more than to agree to what male participants decide" (Interview 9, Bujumbura, 14 May 2017). In order to counter those resistances, many women's organizations build advocacy strategies around international texts that encourage their inclusion in peace-related activities, such as the UNSC Resolution 1325. Such strategies are however more efficient when the concerned conflict prevention or dialogue activities are organized by the international community.

In spite of, or perhaps in part thanks to all these challenges and difficulties, Burundian women's groups have managed to develop a significant number of conflict prevention and early warning activities, which are not only innovative but also flexible and adapted to the characteristics of the Burundian conflict. Their inclusive, multifaceted and small-scale initiatives provide interesting insights into how current conflict prevention approaches could be better tailored to contemporary conflicts' features.

4. Opening up the scope of conflict prevention

Burundian women's groups' strategies for preventing the reemergence of conflict display five key characteristics that challenge conventional approaches to conflict prevention, and offer creative alternatives. First, all women's groups, even those that are primarily focused on the national level, agree that the "local" is, or should be, the level at which conflict and violence can be effectively be prevented. An idea, often heard during my

interviews, is that preventing the conflict nationally depends first and foremost on what is happening locally. Thus, preventing the conflict from re-escalating at the national level cannot be done without preventing or solving disputes at the local level, an idea that is strongly supported by research (see for instance Mitchell and Hancock, 2012). As one participant explained: “There would not be any conflict at the national level if there were not issues at the local one” (Interview 8, Bujumbura, 14 May 2017). So while a few Burundian women’s groups are predominantly active on the national political scene, and try to mediate between national political actors, most other women’s groups focus their attention on the local level, where they implement a mixture of structural and operational prevention strategies. This local approach in conflict prevention is a consequence both of the obstacles and challenges listed in the previous section, and of a deliberate strategy for increasing the effectiveness of their conflict prevention initiatives. Over the past few years, Burundian women’s organizations have for instance been setting up and running early warning systems that relay information about conflicts emerging in the provinces towards the national level. They have also been involved in the mediation of local conflicts, including when these had strong political and military undertones (Interview 7, Bujumbura, 14 May 2017). Other local programs include micro-credit projects to help the poorest households, capacity-building programs, educational support, training in the prevention, resolution and mediation of conflicts, as well as school-based drama groups where youth are encouraged to tell their stories and share their resentment or sorrow. Even if some of their initiatives have occasionally been ridiculed by political authorities (Interview 5, Bujumbura, 12 May 2017), there are clear indications that they are making a difference, notably by helping to mediate local conflicts, as in the previously-mentioned case of Dushirehamwe. These activities create

local and relatively safe spaces where at-risk populations like unemployed youth, former combatants or displaced people can express their anger, but also share stories and build connections. By opening these spaces, women's organizations actively re-politicize the local and relocate it at the center of conflict prevention work (see also Anderlini, 2007).

Second, my interviews reveal that women's groups draw a lot of strength and resilience from their ability to be active at different geographical levels at the same time. Most groups have offices in the capital city Bujumbura, but maintain a presence in most or all of the 18 provinces, at the communal and the *collines* levels – the smallest administrative subdivision – and within specific neighborhoods or areas that are considered as sensitive. Sub-national echelons provide both vantage points from which they can launch crucial preventive actions, and to which they can retreat if they have to. For instance, focusing on the community level allows them to carry on their work when it is deemed too dangerous to do so at the national level (Interview 2, Bujumbura, 11 May 2017). So even if many women's groups have been considerably weakened because of governmental repression and control, and because of a significant decrease in funding, their local anchorage has protected them, by providing them a space in which to redeploy their activities. Admittedly, measuring the success of this strategy – or of any other conflict prevention initiative (Griffin, 2001) – is tricky, but these organizations' multileveled approach undoubtedly helps them being more sustainable, flexible and versatile. It is also in line with the idea that local and national peacebuilding processes are co-constituted (Hancock and Mitchell, 2018).

The third noticeable characteristic of Burundian women's groups' strategies in the field of conflict prevention lies in their inclusive approach, in terms both of targeted populations, and of topics covered. Because they are present and active at different

geographical levels at the same time, women's groups have the ability to choose a different level of intervention in function of the audience they are targeting (for instance people inhabiting different provinces, in rural or urban environments, and so on). And because most of these groups' approach is encompassing and not focused on specific sections of the population, they can adjust their programs at will. Their target audience is not limited to women, but extends to the whole Burundian population. And depending on whom they are trying to reach, they will use different strategies, for instance social media for youth, radio in the countryside, and so on (Interview 11, Bujumbura, 15 May 2017). Interestingly, several women's organizations organize joint events and programs with men's groups like CHOVI (Coalition des hommes pour la lutte contre les violences faites aux femmes, "Men's Coalition for the Fight against Violence on Women") in order to promote less violent masculinity models (Interview 6, Bujumbura, 13 May 2017), a strategy which has become increasingly popular at the international level too (Wright, 2018). Young people, and in particular young men, are seen as crucial targets for conflict prevention, and several women's groups have developed specific strategies like the organization of intergenerational discussions and exchanges in order to reach out to them. A lot of efforts are also put into keeping young men occupied, in order to prevent them from falling into criminal activities, or from joining armed groups (Interview 11, Bujumbura, 15 May 2017). In addition, instead of distinguishing between actions that academics would describe as either structural or operational conflict prevention, most Burundian women's organizations envisage structural prevention initiatives, like micro-financing programs and professional training for young people, as a complement to, or even as undistinguishable from, operational prevention. Their belief in the fact that "everyone, even at the local level, has to work for peace" (Interview 11, Bujumbura,

15 May 2017), underscores the importance of inclusivity for the success of conflict prevention, a claim that has been repeatedly confirmed by research (see for instance Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2016; de Carvalho and Kumalo, 2019; Hancock and Mitchell, 2018). Promoting inclusivity can only be done by ignoring restrictive perceptions of what and who matters for conflict prevention. For instance, making sure that as many Burundians as possible have access to health care, to schooling, to judicial support or to micro-financing, is undoubtedly a way of improving their lives, but it also enhances peace and stability, and therefore helps preventing the re-emergence of the conflict (Interview 10, Bujumbura, 15 May 2017).

Fourth, as women's organizations, they all put considerable stress on the necessity to empower women in order to stabilize the society and to avoid a return to conflict (Caprioli, 2005). For women who participate in mediation and dialogue initiatives at the local, national or international levels, this entails petitioning for the presence of more women in negotiating and mediating teams, or as "gender experts". Other groups try to foster women's participation by training them in political communication, by encouraging them to participate in elections, and by helping female candidates to get more votes (Interview 5, Bujumbura, 12 May 2017). One of the core activities many women's groups implement relates to capacity-building, for instance through coaching and mentoring programs between women aspirants and elected female politicians (Interview 9, Bujumbura, 14 May 2017). While some women's groups target specific categories of women who are more vulnerable, such as former female combatants (Interview 3, Bujumbura, 11 May 2017), all try to help women regardless of their religious, social, ethnic or geographic origins. They have for instance arranged the translation in Kirundi of international conventions that are deemed particularly important for women, like the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against

Women). In addition, they make sure that the most important national legal texts, usually published in French, are translated into Kirundi too. Such work is particularly important because most people living in rural areas do not understand French, and are not aware of their own political and social rights (Interview 10, Bujumbura, 15 May 2017). Another important aspect of this empowering work relates to the capacity of women's organizations to exchange on their experiences and to share information. In spite of the divisions and cleavages previously mentioned, Burundi counts numerous women's umbrella organizations and associations that allow women to discuss, debate, and, when possible, elaborate common strategies. Some of these platforms focus on the policy and the political levels, while others specialize on socio-economic or cultural activities, but they all play the role of soundboards for conversations on conflict prevention and on peace building.

A final characteristic pertains to the timing of the conflict prevention actions implemented by these groups. There have been numerous academic and policy debates on whether conflict prevention tools, especially at the international level, should be deployed before the conflict escalates, or at the very early stages of conflict escalation (Lund, 2009). Among the leaders of the groups I spoke with, there is a clear sense that the pre-escalation or "emergence" phase (Kriesberg, 2003), before violence starts to spread out, offers a more decisive window of opportunity. They are convinced that this period is the most favorable for the organization and the success of mediation and dialogue activities, because at this stage it is still possible to convince people of the detrimental effect of violent strategies (among others, Interview 3, Bujumbura, 11 May 2017 and Interview 11, Bujumbura, 15 May 2017). Considering the fact that most episodes of violence that Burundi has witnessed over the past decades have occurred just before, during, or right after elections have taken place, the

women I spoke with believe that pre-electoral periods are absolutely crucial for conflict prevention. This understanding of escalation temporalities allows them to plan ahead their conflict prevention work and to deploy, when and where possible, specific tools at these critical junctures. During these periods, they will for instance pay additional attention to the mediation of local conflicts, to civic education training, to early warning, to destabilizing rumors, but also to increasing social unrest (Interview 8, Bujumbura, 14 May 2017). They will also collect information at the local level in order to design further early intervention and mediation work, and to identify avenues for effective national and international conflict prevention strategies.

Concluding thoughts: towards more inclusive, flexible and sustainable conflict prevention approaches?

The activities of Burundian women's groups invite us to reconsider several key assumptions regarding conflict prevention. First, the idea that operational prevention would be "top-down" and structural prevention "bottom-up" does not correspond to what can be observed on the ground. This distinction, based on an understanding of conflict prevention as solely or mostly implemented by states or international organizations, does not suit most contemporary conflicts' features, especially intrastate conflicts. In these cases, it is often the interplay between multiple and sometimes heavily politicized local conflicts, and the national political scene, that explains violence escalation (Kalyvas, 2003). Placing the local at the heart of conflict prevention activities thus seems crucial. In particular, local grassroots peacebuilders, and especially women's groups, can have very different views on how conflict

can be prevented, and these can be a rich source of new ideas and creative approaches, that also have the advantage of being rooted in the local context (see also Anderlini, 2007).

Further, the Burundian example draws our attention to the fact that an inclusive approach is needed in order to reach out to sections of the population that are the most likely to be involved in conflict escalation and that have been instrumental in previous cycles of violence (for example demobilized combatants, unemployed youth, and so on) or particularly vulnerable during episodes of violence (for instance repatriated women, internally displaced people, and so on). Inclusivity also pertains to themes that can be included in conflict prevention work. While operational conflict prevention is traditionally described as limited to the realms of the party-political, of the institutions and of diplomacy, women's groups' activities demonstrate that such conceptions are built on a far too narrow understanding of escalation processes (see Basu and Confortini, 2017). Reducing operational prevention's scope to the political, or rather to a specific conception of the political, hinders its effectiveness when dynamics of escalation are multifaceted and multicausal.

These flexible, inclusive and versatile conflict prevention strategies can only work when their timing is appropriate, which shows the importance of not adopting a "one-fits-all" approach, but to rely on local actors' knowledge and understanding of conflict dynamics, sometimes accumulated over decades. In that sense, civil society actors in general, and women's groups in particular, offer a crucial expertise that is complementary to that of national and international actors. Not only have they often developed extensive networks, local relays and outreach activities, but they have also built trust with local communities through the implementation of various revenue generating activities, training and capacity-building programs. Allowing these organizations to contribute more actively to national and

international conflict prevention forums, or at the very least learning from their experience when openly including them proves impossible, can only help us coming up with more effective conflict prevention approaches.

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